

'I'll be home for Christmas' playing in my head and heart

On Dec. 6, I got the call from Emily Hutchinson, Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH) from the Veterans housing. She asked me, "Any word yet?" I replied, "No." But they did say it would take two weeks. So, tomorrow I'm going to call Home Forward. Emily suggested I call The Morrison to see if they passed inspection so I could move in.

I called The Morrison and Amanda answered. I told her who I was and that I was waiting on word to find out if I could move in. She informed me that Dan, the manager, wasn't in. Then she said, "I'll call him and ask him."

My heart sank. I've heard this many times. It always ends up with, "Sorry we couldn't accept you." But this was an inspection. Either way, I knew from my experiences that something was going to prevent me from getting into housing.

Amanda asked for my number. "I don't know it." I asked if I could call her back. "Yes, in about an hour," she said.

I thought, good, that will give me some time before the mayoral candidate forum on housing. About an hour later I called Amanda back. She told me she called Dan and that he was waiting for a reply. Aahg! This is killing me! Wait, wait, wait. I gave Amanda my cell number. She said she'd call me as soon as she got word.

I went to the forum. I imagined myself getting the call of acceptance. I imagined myself yelling, "I got housing!" No, that's not my style. I mingled a little, then sat down and put my cell ringer on low. Halfway through the forum, I got the call.

In a low voice I said, "Hello, this is Leo." Amanda kept asking, "Leo Rhodes? Leo Rhodes?" I went outside.

"Hello, this is Leo Rhodes," I said. Amanda told me the inspection passed, so I had housing. Alright. Yes. Cool. She asked when I wanted to move in. Tomorrow, I said. "Tomorrow?" She asked. I said, "Yep."

Amanda asked, "How does 10:30 sound? Come in and we'll finish the paperwork." 10:30 it was.

I was sitting in the forum. There were about 10 of my friends sitting around me. I



Leo Rhodes is a street activist and homeless advocate. He is also a vendor with Street Roots and a regular contributor to the newspaper.

felt like yelling out loud, "Hey everybody! I got housing!!! But instead, I started texting. I even texted my friends in Seattle, Wa. Some of them texted back asking, "Who's this?" Leo Rhodes, I texted them back.

My texts were coming in as fast as I was sending them out. Great, wonderful and congratulations were some of the replies that I got back. Commissioner Nick Fish was at the forum. I passed him a note. Then I sat down to watch his reaction. He almost jumped out of his chair. The person next to him must have asked him what was going on because they both looked at me and smiled. Commissioner Fish asked, "When is the house warming?" I shrugged and responded, "I don't know." He replied, "Be sure you tell me, I'll be there." I introduced him to Emily Hutchinson, the woman at VASH who helped me through the process of securing housing. Later, Emily asked me if I thought he'd actually show up at my place. Yes, I said.

I spent the next two hours thinking about what I have been through. I really couldn't dwell on it too much because I had a documentary to finish. It was difficult to focus on the documentary. Images of the past and future kept going through my mind.

Images of the past, where it all started on my reservation: The Gila River Indian Reservation. There were many deaths that came to mind. One in particular was the death of my nephew. He kept asking me for help to get out of gang banging and drinking too much alcohol. Long story short for him. He convinced me that he was ready to give up his old lifestyle. I told him I would take some time off from work the next day and we would start working on it. The next day never came for him. He was shot hours after I told him this. I was next door and came

back soon after it happened.

I patched him up and then waited for the ambulance to come. When the ambulance came, they refused to enter and work on my nephew. Protocol said they needed a cop there to continue. Even though we told them there was no danger, they still refused to come in and help. So, I watched my nephew die twice. My nephew was just starting out on his life. He was 18 years and one month old, smart, and now he is gone. There isn't a day that goes by that I don't think about this.

I've seen and heard the cruelty of humanity when I, and others, wanted to start a tent city in the suburbs of Seattle. Non-homeless people, homeless people, church leaders, elected officials, and business people — everybody told me I was crazy. It will never happen. Same thing with indoor and outdoor shelters.

The stereotypes always come into the conversation. I've heard and seen many men and women crying out of frustration. My homeless friends ask me why people would say such cruel things about them. They would always end with, "They don't even know us."

If there was no tent City, I would try an indoor shelter — which were usually full. Others had some restrictions which I didn't meet. Being on the street was even rougher. You're constantly looking for a safe, dry place to sleep. It could be two, three, or four o'clock in the morning. This is also the time that the rent-a-cops usually hit me.

In the summertime, the heat was really bad. I used to throw a blanket over me. If I didn't, the bugs would crawl all over me. I also felt safer for some reason. The summertime, I felt, was a lot more dangerous. There were more people out and the youth were out and about. By the youth, I mean the non-homeless youth. Most of them have no respect for the homeless. I was talking to a youth counselor the other day. He told me he couldn't understand why the youth had this bad way of thinking toward homeless people. I told him it's the media. Look at how they portray us — dirty, grungy, uneducated, low-lives. We're not all

like that. It has been proven recently, with Right 2 Dream Too.

All of the negative stuff, I got from decision makers, the weather, the struggles of homelessness. The big one — sleep, a safe, secure place to go — got to me.

Wade Varner, for a long time was telling me, if I needed a place to sleep, he had a couch for me. About a year ago, I took him up on the offer.

I've been writing for Street Roots and also learned how to make documentaries. Wade would remind me of my health and that I needed to take care of myself.

Then there's Wilbur Melton, an Alaskan Native, my Native brother that I used to drink with on the streets of Portland. He's clean and sober now and helping other Natives and homeless people.

On Dec. 7, I went to finalize my paperwork to get my own apartment. I haven't had my own place since 2001.

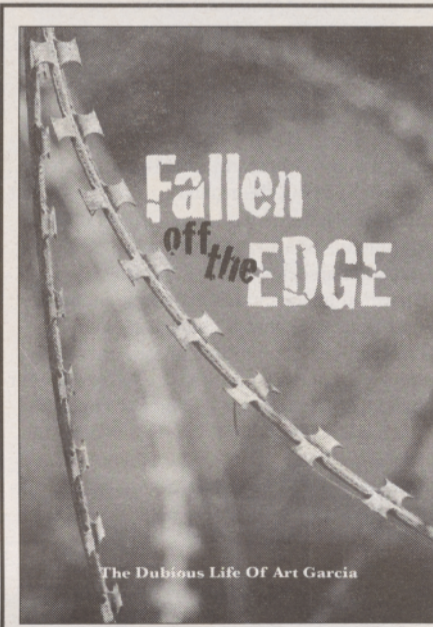
Dan, the manager, asked if I had the money or a check for the place. "I don't," was my reply. "Emily is on the way, she'll know about that," I told him. I knew there was something to prevent me from going inside. I stood there, my backpack and coats still on, ready to leave.

Emily came in and reassured the manager that he would be paid. We started the paperwork. I still didn't believe I was going to get the apartment. I took some pictures. I still have my coats on. I was ready for someone to say, "I'm sorry, we can't do this."

For about 10 years, I've signed affidavits for the homeless. The first six contracts were for Tent City 4. I was the treasurer for SHARE/WHEEL in Seattle, so I signed for items for the two tent cities there, 15 indoor shelters, housing for work programs and other programs as needed.

Now I was signing for me and only me. It feels weird.

Transition isn't easy. But during the signing, a song kept going through my mind. The song is, "I'll Be Home for Christmas" The next part is my own home. Happy Holidays!



Fallen Off the Edge

A new book by Art Garcia

"Fallen Off the Edge" is a chronicle of one man's experiences after returning from the Vietnam War. Told through the eyes of Street Roots columnist Art Garcia, this book celebrates the major victories born from a series of questionable choices. Art's jocular storytelling takes the reader along with him in and out of the California prison system over the course of 10 years until he found the strength and courage to pull himself up from the fall.

The book is available online at www.blurb.com under searchword Art Garcia.



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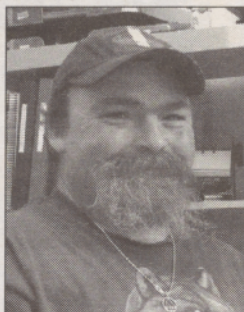
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— Ted Jack, SR vendor

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